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# The contributions *of applied anthropology* to peasant development

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The present surge of interest in participative rural development projects based on peasant communities differs from similar past experiences in that it forms part of a broader tendency to decentralize social management, to enhance the role of the beneficiaries of social policies, and to give them a bigger say in their implementation. In order to avoid repeating the failures of past decades in programmes designed to reduce rural poverty, it is necessary to incorporate elements of modern applied anthropology in programmes for the training of extension workers and in the explanatory models of specialists formulating rural development projects. The practical contribution that applied anthropology can make stems not only from the experience of anthropologists in development projects but also, and above all, from a knowledge of the empirical reality revealed by academic anthropology. Although some anthropological concepts are already being used in some other disciplines, they usually correspond to outmoded theories already discarded by many anthropologists. This article identifies some of these "anthropological myths" and explores ways in which the new perceptions of anthropology could be applied to some of the commonest components of rural development projects. The concepts used in this dual task include the development cycle of peasant households, kinship as a reserve of mutual aid, the community as a referent of prestige, and ethnic identity as a social resource.

# I

## Introduction

Various Latin American governments and the international agencies which deal with the reduction of poverty are displaying considerable interest in community-based participative rural development. This is perfectly natural, since in spite of the high degree of urbanization, poverty in twelve Latin American countries is still a predominantly rural phenomenon (World Bank Group, 1996; Valdés and Wiens, 1996). Neither structural reforms, nor the growth of the product, nor the functioning of the market have been able to bring about a significant reduction in poverty in this sector.

At the same time, there is a long history of defeats in the war against rural poverty, and it is interesting to note that proposals for social investment to resume the struggle are being made once again after the lengthy withdrawal from such efforts that followed the meagre results obtained in the 1970s from the big integrated rural development projects.

The new participative rural development projects centered around communities of small farmers are in no sense "the mixture as before":<sup>1</sup> they only retain a few elements of those integrated projects, because it is considered from the start that the excessive centralization and technocratic nature of the latter raised their cost and adversely affected feedback and the motivation of the beneficiaries (Errázuriz, 1986; Durston, 1988; FAO, 1988).

Nowadays, emphasis is placed on the fact that support programmes for small rural producers must be participative and community-based (World Bank Group, 1996; Banuri and others, 1996). It may be recalled that the few successful integrated rural development programmes shared the common feature of displaying a high degree of real participation of their beneficiaries (Lacroix, 1985).

Although the present proposals may not seem completely new –participative development was in vogue on a number of previous occasions, beginning with the "community development" of the 1960s and

attaining more sophisticated expressions in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Coombs, 1980)– what is new is that they now form part of a new general model for the fight against poverty.

Such proposals form part of a more general tendency towards broad and sustainable decentralized management of local resource systems in order to give all the interested parties a chance to participate (World Bank Group, 1996). The concept of participation is now both more complex and more concrete than the optimistic ideological formulations of past eras, and it usually means greater decision-making power –empowerment– for the beneficiaries, greater negotiating capacity, and accountability; the right for them to demand reports (Durston, in the press). This scheme is quite novel because it means that programmes must be propelled and managed mainly by the beneficiaries themselves, rather than by the central government or technicians (Ashby and Sperling, 1992).

The experience of past decades made it clear some time ago that generating and organizing community involvement is much more complicated than many advocates of community participation believe (Coombs, 1980, p. 23). In most rural villages resources and power are concentrated in a few hands, there are few truly democratic institutions, and there are rival factions. Good intentions are not enough to ensure the success of interventions from outside: it is also necessary to take into account the attitudes, sociology, cultural traditions, politics and economic aspects of the community (Coombs, 1980, p. 24).

To be more specific, changes are needed in the local and regional environment to permit the democratization of development and the strengthening of excluded groups as social actors (Fox, 1995), as well as the training of planners and extension workers in the socio-cultural dynamics of peasant society. In particular, it is necessary to understand the social organization and priorities and strategies of the peasants, which may be very different from the schemes proposed by members of urban, developed, "modern" societies.

The anthropological theory of social organization (1961) deals with this elusive reality that lies

<sup>1</sup> "This is not business as usual!", World Bank Group, 1996, p. 15.

between the individual and macro levels (DeWalt and DeWalt, 1992); thus, it offers explanatory and potentially prescriptive contributions which are highly relevant to the new approaches that place the social actors at the centre of proposals for participation (Cernea, 1996, pp. 340 - 352).

Such proposals make it clear that in order to be able to help the rural poor to organize themselves, to understand the policy options before them and to formulate their demands it is necessary to incorporate into the strategies the recommendations made on the basis of research into social relations (World Bank Group, 1996, p. 34). Anthropological research, in particular, has created a body of knowledge on Latin American peasant communities which goes back for more than half a century (from Redfield, 1930, through Foster, 1948, Tax, 1953 and others) and has been enhanced over the years by new findings and scientific debate.

It is quite true that most of this body of ethnographic description, analysis and development of theories is of an academic nature and only indirectly touches upon the practical problems of rural development programmes. Nevertheless, this store of knowledge and theory allows anthropologists to gain access to a wide range of analytical tools and comparative examples which, taken together, enable them to appreciate the complex empirical reality of the peasant world that lies beneath superficial impressions (Cernea, 1996, pp. 340 - 352).

Thus, it shows up once again the falsity of the alleged dichotomy between academic or analytical work, on the one hand, and practical or operational work on the other. The understanding of the realities of poor rural communities made possible by the theoretical models and accumulated knowledge of anthropology cannot be replaced by experience in the field, because on its own this usually merely strengthens a perception of simple models that claim to represent the complex peasant reality. Although professionals in other fields are usually familiar with basic anthropological concepts, these tend to be of an elementary nature and correspond in many cases to outmoded theories already discarded by modern anthropology. Until quite recently, many agronomists and economists dealing with agricultural issues opposed the incorporation of anthropologists into the rural poverty debate, except in respect of a few limited topics, but it is increasingly clear that the new proposals require that extension workers in the field

and experts formulating programmes to combat rural poverty should incorporate into their models and approaches some basic –but not over-simplified– elements of anthropology (Cernea, 1996, pp. 340 - 352).

In particular, there is an increasing awareness of the need to change the approach of agricultural extension activities aimed at peasants. The idea is to get away from the tendency –which is predominant in the traditional academic training of extension workers and planners– to think in terms of a simple one-way transfer of information and techniques to producers who have no knowledge of them or have completely mistaken ideas. This traditional view also assumes that the beneficiaries live in a simple, standard social environment which is the same everywhere and does not warrant much analysis by the experts who seek to increase peasants' productivity.

Although there is an awareness of the shortcomings of this approach and it is known that social and cultural variables can determine the success or failure of a project, there is not such a clear awareness of what those variables are, how they can be identified in detail, and what adjustments they call for in the activities of an actual project.

Here, we have considered some shared perceptions: that we should gain a deeper knowledge of the conditions we aim to change; that the socio-cultural realities of peasant society do not only represent problems and obstacles for the transfer of the productive know-how of the experts, but also strengths and opportunities which should be exploited and strengthened, and that there are abstract elements which are common to the varying cultures and situations of peasants from different parts of Latin America. These common elements make it possible to prepare a common framework for guiding the construction of more complex models reflecting the particular circumstances of each project and each rural community. Some of these elements refer primarily to cultures of indigenous origin, but the processes of syncretism between the original and the Spanish cultures (in the cases of both present-day indigenous peoples and non-indigenous peasants) allow them to be extended to every peasant community in Latin America, as a general framework, for the purpose of analysing each specific situation.

The following sections will try to give a brief definition of the relevant theoretical concepts of social and cultural anthropology: i) the development cycle of the household unit; ii) the community as a

referent of prestige; iii) kinship as a reserve of mutual aid, and iv) ethnic identity as a social resource. They will also seek to correct some common anthropological myths in this respect which are based on outmoded theories already discarded by anthropologists, to link up these concepts within a coherent theoretical framework that can serve

as a guide in the analysis of actual situations arising in participative development projects for small producers, and to set forth some practical connotations of this framework for certain components of participative rural development projects, especially those concerned with organization, extension activities, credit and marketing.

## II

### The anthropological approach: some fundamental concepts

Their culture and their informal social organization<sup>2</sup> are factors that determine people's decisions and their relations with larger organizations.

The term "culture" has been incorporated into the modern vocabulary with rather a vague meaning. It is important to develop the concept behind this word more fully from the standpoint of modern anthropology. Every culture has two main components: on the one hand, a view of the world –i.e., a coherent set of beliefs about reality–, and on the other an ethical view: that is to say, a scale of values that determine attitudes to good and evil and a set of rules for people's "proper" behaviour. In order to become a culture, this dual view –of what is real and what is correct or proper– must be shared and transmitted within specific, concrete groups of persons, through a common language. Modern anthropology tends to make an analytical distinction between the concept of culture (an abstract system of ideas) and the concept of social structure (the practices, customs, regular interactions and institutions which exist and are observable in real everyday life).

It has long been accepted that every specialist should have an "open mind" regarding what is taking place in intellectual fields outside the "closed system" of his own speciality (Gluckman, 1964). Even

so, there is a problem of communication among the different professions which stems above all from the frequent fact that even those specialists who have acquired elementary notions of another discipline –such as anthropological theory, for example– usually learn (either from teachers working in their own speciality or from textbooks) outmoded theories which have already been left behind in fast-evolving fields of knowledge. In the following sections we shall summarize and explain these "anthropological myths": that is to say, these beliefs which are widely held but whose bases have been greatly weakened in modern anthropology.<sup>3</sup>

*Anthropological myth: The cultural systems and informal institutions of indigenous and peasant societies are ancestral traditions which have remained unchanged throughout the centuries; contact with the modern economy and society, the mass media, etc. means the destruction of these age-old cultures and institutions.*

This belief appears to be the result of the first hypotheses developed almost a century ago by the functionalist school of anthropology. Now, however, we know that, while intercultural encounters always mean tensions on both sides (and in extreme cases may lead to the disappearance of a culture), cultures

<sup>2</sup> The term "informal social organization" has a connotation in anthropology which is totally different from that used in many development projects, where it means any organization that does not have recognized legal status. Anthropologists, however, apply this term to the stable social relationships among persons which are not always even given formal names but which constitute the social fabric that gives its strength to the peasant community (Firth, 1961; Barth, 1966; Durston, 1992).

<sup>3</sup> Truth to tell, almost all the ideas which we have called "anthropological myths" in this article, in order to liven up the analysis a little, still have their supporters among anthropologists themselves, for anthropology, like all sciences, is a battlefield of warring theories. The interpretations favoured in this article are simply the hypotheses that the author himself supports, without losing sight of the fact that today's "truths" may very likely be changed in the future.

have much greater capacity to adapt to changes in the material environment and in the sphere of ideas than they were formerly credited with.

Culture is not, however, a simple and immutable set of rules that can be summed up in a few words. Many anthropologists believe that those rules, as well as being expressed through a language, actually *function* as languages or programmes, comparable with those of a computer in that they are mutable and contain sentences and routines that remain latent and manifest themselves only in the right circumstances. Cultures are constantly changing and adapting their beliefs and rules in response to the changes that are taking place every day in the social, economic and intellectual environment. In this sense, there are no traditional cultures: there is no culture in the world which is the same today as it was a generation ago, or even a year ago. A culture, like a silent language, is constantly evolving as people change the way they use it.

The most novel theoretical proposals put forward an even more dynamic idea of cultures. They see cultures –like ecosystems– as adaptive systems which are in a constant process of change, generated by the co-evolution of the strategies applied by the individual agents of the populations making up the societies involved (Cowan and others, 1995, various articles).

Among the most salient aspects of cultures analysed below are mutual aid and the values of prestige and social status; among the institutional forms of social organization, special emphasis will be placed on the difference between household and family and the development cycle of the household; on kinship and kindred; on “diadic contracts”; on mutual support groups connected with the clientage of the so-called “big men”, and on the community as referent of prestige and as the context for the taking of decisions.

### III

## The development cycle of the household and the life-strategy of the head of household in the management of peasant holdings

### 1. Contributions and limits of the approach based on systems of production

Let us start out from the assumption that rural development projects are based on a view of the peasant holding which is rather special in terms of economic theory because it differentiates this type of holding from a conventional capitalist agricultural enterprise. In other words, let us assume that the readers of this article share the view that the main object of decision-making in the peasant economy –the family farm– combines an income-oriented logic with a consumption-oriented one, since its labour force are also the owners of the enterprise. Unlike a capitalist enterprise, the management aim in the family farm is not to reduce the cost of its own labour force, and neither can it lay off staff when labour needs go down.

*Anthropological myth: For some theoreticians of agricultural economics, the peasant unit follows a special rationale whose sole aim is reproduc-*

*tion and not accumulation of capital; consequently, once the basic needs for the social reproduction of the household have been satisfied, peasants will not keep on producing in order to accumulate capital, especially if this means taking risks. This view of peasants as being reluctant to participate in agricultural development is further strengthened by the first anthropological myth, referred to earlier, which considers peasant culture to be an immutable ancestral system and sees peasants as lacking in entrepreneurial spirit, averse to taking risks, and generally “resistant to change”.*

This image of peasants appears to stem from a mistaken reading of the Russian rural sociologist Chayanov, although it also concurs with stereotypes deeply rooted for many decades past. It is also strengthened by fragmentary and anecdotic observations of the behaviour of some peasants. Thus, it is quite true that many poor peasants are averse to

taking risks, many slacken the pace of family labour if their basic needs have been satisfied, and many are resistant to change, but these forms of behaviour are circumstantial and are not essential features of peasant culture.

For example, many anthropologists consider that nowadays a tendency to give priority to mere subsistence appears to be due largely to the need to minimize risks in the poorest households when their physical survival itself is in the balance (Durstun and Crivelli, 1984). In many of these communities, however, there are "rich peasants" who have made some progress in a process of sustained accumulation. Reduction of the pace of family labour takes place when it has been possible to overcome a situation of excessive self-exploitation, after which the demands on the labour of the smallest children can be reduced and normal standards for the sexual division of labour can be applied, leaving the women to look after the home, the family vegetable garden, and the barnyard.

Resistance to change and innovation, for its part, is almost always due to some older peasants, for the younger ones are usually very open to new ideas. For many years this has been interpreted as evidence of the recent penetration of "modern" culture in the new generation. However, the repetition of this phenomenon in successive generations of young peasants supports the hypothesis that it is rather a question of the typical characteristics of different stages in life (Durstun, 1996) and that old peasants who stick to rigid formulas today do so because they are old: when they were young they may have been rebels and innovators, sometimes imposing formulas which were new in those days but are now unsuited to present-day conditions.

Whether for reasons of survival or of accumulation, peasant units apply various "systems of production" which combine multiple purposes and products. A basic error in rural development programmes is to treat the various family farms of a community or region as if they were homogeneous, instead of differentiating them into a manageable number of types or models of production systems (see DeWalt, 1985; Van Alphen, 1994).

In the following pages we shall analyse the question of the multiple objectives—especially the non-economic ones—which guide the taking of decisions in the management of peasant family enterprises

and of the social resources that such enterprises mobilize in their strategies, which are both economic and social.

From an analysis of systems of production, it may be concluded that formal multi-purpose organizations (cooperatives and committees) are useful for coordinating self-help efforts to overcome rural poverty, but the fundamental decision-making units are the family farms. As these farms have quite varied types of systems of production (for ecological or social reasons, or for reasons connected with the life-cycle of the head of household), their objectives do not always coincide. The level of participation in the pursuit of a given common production objective, even when this has been decided upon democratically in the organization, is bound to be low in the case of farms whose systems of production do not include that objective in their strategies. Consequently, for certain specific objectives it is better to encourage the spontaneous emergence of interest groups among farms with the same type of system of production (Van Alphen, 1994). To a large extent, then, work with such groups must be flexible in terms of time, must fit in with the demands formulated by the peasants themselves, and must seek to encourage the formation of interest groups corresponding to the various systems of production.

One of the limitations of the approach based on systems of production is that the analysis usually only includes the economic objectives of the farm. Research and the formation of theories along anthropological lines can make some of their most important contributions in this field by revealing how social objectives strongly condition decision-making in peasant households.

## 2. Social factors in peasant decision-making

There are various levels of definition of the "decision-making unit" in peasant society, ranging from the individual, through the nuclear household, the extended family and informal mutual support groups, to the community itself. All these "units" of different levels of aggregation influence each other in their decisions. Another of the contributions of the approach based on systems of production is that it has corrected the traditional practice of considering the "farmer"—that is to say, the head of the family—as the only interlocutor. Today, the other members of



the household are beginning to come forward out of the shadows: nowadays, studies take into account the farmer's wife and, to an incipient extent, young people too (Durstun, 1996).

Nevertheless, at the minimum level of decision-making—that of the individual—it is the head of the household (usually male) who interests us most in this analysis, because in Latin American peasant society it is his objectives (material and social) which predominate in the economic strategy of the household. This is “the other side of the sex-based approach”: the current efforts to overcome the traditional “invisibility” of peasant women (Campaña, 1994) must not lead us to neglect the due analysis of male roles and their incorporation in the planning of development project activities.

In reality, there is no equality of the sexes in decision-making in peasant culture: neither in indigenous culture nor, even less, in non-indigenous peasant life. The head of the household is the dominant actor in defining the objectives of the family enterprise, which are usually also accepted by the other members. Unlike what happens in a truly commercial enterprise, the social objectives of the head of household—fulfilling religious duties, financing the studies of the children, providing a good dowry for a daughter, leaving the children something to inherit and, above all, amassing social prestige in the community and the area—are just as important as increasing profitability or capital, if not more so.

Although the objectives of the head of household are processed through negotiation with the other members of the household, and although they derive partly from his affective relationship with them, it is the head of household who represents his farm, not only for traditional planners but also for society; he is also the figure who represents his whole nuclear family in the social hierarchy of the community. Consequently, the productive activities of the family farm and the participation of each family member in them are aimed largely at achieving the personal objectives—whether material or symbolic—of the head of household.

### 3. What is a “family”?

It is extremely important to distinguish between two terms which are very often used as though they were synonyms: family and household. However, house-

hold is not the same thing as family: whereas “household” is a unit of residence and consumption in which there is usually only a single consumption budget and all its members normally prepare and eat the same meal, “family” is a broader concept which overlaps in everyday language with the idea of “household” but actually has less clearly marked limits. The picture becomes even more complicated when we note that both households and families are very often described as being “nuclear” or “extended”. Even social science publications do not use these terms in an agreed, standard manner, so that each author should really make it clear what definition of them he is using.

*Anthropological myth: Social scientists who are not themselves anthropologists very often use a simplistic scheme in which the extended family and household are equated with “tradition” and with indigenous culture and rurality, while the nuclear family and household are seen as typical institutions of modern, urban western culture.*

The first danger involved in this scheme is that of confusing the concept of family (as a group of related persons) with the idea of household (as a domestic and residential unit). It is the latter institution which is registered by censuses and household surveys: indeed, the statistics almost always speak of households and not of families.

The second point is that the simple dichotomy posited by this myth does not correspond to reality. In many countries of the region there is a higher proportion of extended households in urban areas than in rural ones, due to the higher cost of urban housing.

Furthermore, the extended household—the residential unit which includes, in addition to the nuclear household, other relatives of the head of household, usually daughters-in-law and grandchildren, aged parents or in-laws—is less common than the nuclear household in rural areas of Latin America. This is not because rural society has become more “urbanized” or “modern”, but because the extended household represents a stage or phase in the long normal development cycle of the household, in which children of the head of household have got married and are temporarily living with their parents until they have enough income and savings to obtain a home of their own. Ethnographic studies carried out in a large number of traditional peasant communities all over Latin America more than half a century ago registered a majority of nuclear households, just like today.

Consequently, the fact that most of the households in a peasant community are nuclear does not mean that that community is losing its traditional culture. By the same token, it is likewise not true that the extended family is now disappearing from peasant society: mutual aid among close relatives continues to be important, even though they may not live in the same household, but it takes different forms from those of yesteryear. The most accurate term for referring to this abstract concept of "family" or "parents" is kinship, and as we shall see below, kinship is the main foundation of the relations between persons on which mutual aid is based.

Here, we have preferred to associate the concept of household with that of the farm, with a head of household who is the farmer "managing" the farm. In view of the importance for the household of the life cycle of this personage, we are particularly interested in analysing the nuclear unit: that is to say, the head of household and his wife and children. The term family will be used here to refer to close relatives who usually aid each other because of their links of common descent or matrimony. The practical connotations of these definitions may be appreciated from the following diagram (the nuclear household always exists, but in order to avoid confusion we shall refer to the nuclear family, since in practice it coincides with the nuclear household):

	Household	Family
Nuclear	Always exists	Abstract concept
Extended	Temporary phase in the life cycle	Always exists

#### 4. Life cycle of the head of household and development cycle of the household

It is worth emphasizing how important the age factor is in this context –i.e., the ages of the persons involved and the economic and social changes associated with their evolution– as this variable is almost always omitted from the conceptual frameworks of rural development projects (Durstun, 1996). Thus, solely with regard to the question before us at this moment –the strategy of the head of household– we may say that as the head of household advances in his life cycle there is normally an increase in his

capacity for autonomous decision-making, in the ratio between the active labour force and dependents, and in the resources accumulated by the head.

Because of the high degree of identity between the objectives of the peasant farm –the "enterprise"– and the personal objectives of the head of household, there is a similarly close correlation between his life cycle and the development cycle of the household.<sup>4</sup> In other words, we can describe this latter cycle in relation to the age of the head of household.

Strictly speaking, the most important thing here is not the chronological age of the head of household, but the sequence of stages in the normal life cycle of male peasants: dependent childhood, the stage of going to school, the stage of acting as the father's helper in productive tasks, the stage of partial economic independence, and the stages of newly-married man, father of young children, head of an adolescent family labour force, head of an extended household, the stage of increasing loss of control over the work of sons who are now grown-up, the stage of giving land to the sons as a gift or advance legacy, and finally the stage of dependent old man.

Any of these stages can take place at different ages or simply not take place at all in particular cases; there are only statistical trends pointing to a common age cycle for all, although these trends may be strongly marked in a given peasant community or regional culture. In operational terms, it may be more exact to take the age at which the head of household got married, or his age when his first child was born, as the starting point for the development cycle of the household.

As a dominant trend, as the life cycle of the head of household advances, so too there is a gradual increase, in the development cycle of the household, in both the number of members and the ratio of active workers to dependents and to the area of land owned. The values of these display similar curves, with peaks at points between 40 and 60 years of age of the head of household. Finally, "demographic differentiation" puts an end to the potential social inequality involved in this concentration of resources, through the division of the capital among several children by inheritance.

<sup>4</sup> For more details on the development cycle of the household, see Goody (ed.), 1958.

## IV

### Social prestige, the community and changes in the probable levels of priority of objectives

#### 1. The prestige of the head, as an objective of the household

The economic approach to peasant farms acknowledges that they establish a scale of priorities for the various economic and family objectives that guide their production decisions. Studying the development cycle of the household helps to understand how the non-economic or "family" objectives change with the different stages in that cycle. The priorities laid down by the head of household evolve from the top-priority objective of subsistence/consumption in the case of a young head, via the objective of accumulation or expansion of capital under a middle-aged head, to the aim—when the head is of advanced age—of maximizing his own prestige by a combination of wealth, generosity and service.

The importance of prestige in peasant communities is generally underestimated in rural development projects, partly because it is a non-economic objective, but probably also because the planners of such projects have accepted the stereotype of peasants who are essentially equal to each other—that is to say, equally poor. At the same time, a technician or professional, looking down from a higher social position, may underestimate the degree of respect and admiration that a peasant may enjoy among his peers. Finally, the scale of values determining an individual's prestige is different from one cultural context to another, although the three factors mentioned in the preceding paragraph are essentially universal.

#### 2. The rural community as referent of prestige

In poor peasant areas of the Andes, Mexico and greater Central America, prestige and status (the social rank resulting from the prestige won by an individual) have traditionally been associated with the

fulfillment of a number of civic and/or religious "offices" which demand a great deal of material resources and time from the head of household.

*Anthropological myth:* A hypothesis put forward in early anthropological studies which turned out to be false in many cases was that expenditure on parties and other social events had the effect of levelling-out personal wealth, by demanding bigger expenditure from men who had managed to begin an accumulation process that could result in their social differentiation (levelling mechanisms).

We now see, on the contrary, that the expenditure of both money and time served as investments in prestige and undefined mutual aid (see below) which paid subsequent economic dividends: the expenses associated with the "offices" (officer of a fraternity, leader or member of some community group, etc.) did not in fact bring the holder down to the common level of poverty. Although a household's capital and level of consumption might go down in the year following expenditure on some civic or religious office, in the long run the head of household would increase his prestige and material fortune.

These traditional formal posts of honour, whose occupation used to be the most visible sign of the prestige of a head of household, have undergone great changes in recent decades, as for example in western Guatemala. In that country (except for some formal political posts whose importance has continued and increased), two new formal institutions have increased their presence in this field: evangelical sects, and international development or aid projects. Many of the activities of the old syncretic civic/religious system which, half a century ago, allowed a head of household (with sufficient land, grown-up children and savings) to show his spending-power and his devotion to his fellow-men have now been supplanted by the occupation of posts in

evangelical movements, in the new Catholic lay organizations, or, increasingly, as committee chairmen, promoters or other capacities in connection with international development aid projects. According to

some analysts (Stall, 1993), these posts—which also hold out the hope of clientage benefits—are now emerging as the new “offices” for giving community prestige to heads of peasant households.<sup>5</sup>

## V

### Mutual aid and the Ego-centered network of kinsfolk as social resources

#### 1. Mutual aid: the main social resource of the household

In addition to its own material and human resources, the household/farm has an important class of social resources which consists essentially of the ties that strengthen cooperation. Unlike other social media, and in contrast with some stereotypes of peasant cooperation, these resources are based not so much on impersonal solidarity in a broad context as on interpersonal ties of concrete, specific individuals.

Perhaps the most important concept for understanding peasant culture better and going deeper than outside appearances is the concept of non-defined mutual aid. Although mutual aid is a form of exchange, it is not so much an economic transaction as a repeated exchange of gifts and favours without any immediate or well-defined compensation (that is to say, “non-defined”), in which each expression of aid reaffirms and strengthens the mutual confidence between the two persons involved.

This brings us to another important aspect of peasant mutual aid: this is not a group relationship (or if it is, it is a group relationship only through a set of individual relationships), but a relationship based on a standing implicit accord between two persons: what Foster called a “diadic contract” – a completely informal contract which is “diadic” because it is between two parties (Foster, 1961, pp. 1172 - 1192). These non-explicit contracts between two persons to help each other in times of need and in economic ventures where there is an element of risk are to be found above all in environments where the law has only a feeble presence and where some personal assurance of good faith or confidence in the solidarity of the other person is needed. In all cultures, but

especially in peasant culture, the shared ethics give rise to a strong sense of duty to aid relatives (especially close relatives of common descent) and to be honest and self-sacrificing with them. This non-defined mutual aid is strongest among relatives, but it also extends to friends of many years' standing, where it is formalized and strengthened in religious terms by acting as godfather, best man, etc., at christenings, weddings, and the like.<sup>6</sup>

*Anthropological myth: The institution of non-defined mutual aid prevents a peasant who manages to save from investing and building up capital in order to grow as a family enterprise. The demands of his duty to provide mutual aid to his relatives oblige a hard-working peasant to immediately share his savings with his less fortunate relatives.*

In order to refute this old belief, which underestimates the self-development capacity of the family farm, we must go more deeply into the nature of the mutual aid networks among Latin American peasants.

<sup>5</sup> This is only one of various recent past changes that must be taken into account by project personnel, not as a mere background to the present situation but as dynamics of social changes which are under way. Another element is population growth during the last generation, which, because of its effect on the population burden on productive land, has changed (among other things) both gerontocratic authority in the household and the political relations in the area. Because of their ongoing effects in the economic and social sphere, these past processes still affect the work of staff in the field, who must be familiar with their evolution in the recent past in order to understand them properly.

<sup>6</sup> These bases for mutual aid are so closely assimilated to blood relationships that godfathers, best men, etc. have been called “pseudo-relatives”.

## 2. The kinship network: a reserve of social resources

Although the strongest and most reliable stable mutual aid relationships that an individual can have are those with his relatives, not all relatives are active participants in "diadic" relationships with a given individual (in anthropological jargon, an "Ego"). On the contrary, the known and recognized relatives of an Ego are no more than a potential reserve of mutual aid relationships: interaction with many relatives is only sporadic and casual, and the relationships with some of them are conflictive and rule out stable mutual aid, with its positive affective charge. Moreover, as the set of people who occupy the roles of relatives (brothers, uncles, brothers-in-law, etc.) is objectively different for different individuals, this network of potential social relationships is "Ego-centered": each Ego is at the centre of a web of relatives disposed in concentric circles, which overlaps and intersects with the networks of relatives of the other Egos in the same community.

## 3. Kinship groups, support groups, and "big men"

Out of this abstract network of potential relationships (to which must be added neighbours, friends and members of the same generation as the Ego), each head of a peasant family maintains active relations of non-defined mutual aid with a much smaller Ego-centered network. At the same time, he naturally participates in the Ego-centered networks of his relatives. These networks of real exchange relations among relatives have been termed "kinship groups". The fact that these kinship groups overlap with each other in a dense web of mutual aid relationships, with constant exchanges of aid, is what gives a kind of invisible solidarity to the community which is much stronger than that which could be provided by an abstract sense of common social interests *vis-à-vis* the rest of the world.

Kinship groups are not "social groups" in the strict sense of anthropological and sociological theory, because this latter concept denotes something more than a dispersed network or a mere category of similar persons: a social group is a set of people with stable interaction relations which has clearly perceptible frontiers that distinguish its members from other persons who are not members of the group. Conse-

quently, Ego-centered kinship groups have been called "quasi-groups" (Mayer, 1966).

Very often, however, kinship groups form the basis for true social groups, whose presence has important implications for any attempt to intervene in a peasant community where such groups exist. These "real", though informal, social groups are support groups for specific notable individuals who in some cultures (such as Andean communities, for example) are called "big men" or something similar. These quasi-groups, in contrast with the myth that there is social pressure to share any savings, help peasant households to accumulate capital and grow as enterprises, through the contributions of labour of the mutual aid network. In return, the younger or less enterprising relatives enjoy the certainty that the "big man" will give help at times of need.

*Anthropological myth: Mutual aid relations in peasant or indigenous societies are all horizontal: i.e., among equals.*

As we have seen, the prevailing tendency is for older heads of households to have more resources and higher status than young people in general, which gives rise to "vertical" or patron-client mutual relations. In western Guatemala, mutual aid between unequal persons is also based on a sometimes very strong form of social stratification within the indigenous community, with abundant goods and high status being bequeathed by some fathers to their sons.

In the final analysis, many "big men" run relatively stable and well-defined support groups, based on their own kinship groups but expanded by godfather-type relationships with various non-relatives. These groups act as expanded economic enterprises and as factions or cliques that support a particular man in the competition for prestige within the community. As their members cannot at the same time be members of the kinship groups of rival prestige-seeking men,<sup>7</sup> it is conceptually valid to speak of true social groups in these cases. In some communities there is only one "big man", who has stood out over the others. In other communities, there may be two or more, all with their respective support groups based on horizontal and vertical mutual aid, thus giving rise

<sup>7</sup> Prestige, unlike capital (which can be generated or created) and more so than in the case of land, is an "absolutely limited good", since only one person can be the man with the highest prestige in a given community.

to conflicts between factions in the economic, political and organizational fields. Moreover, in many cases there is the paradoxical situation that, in order to strengthen commercial links, there may be god-

father-type relationships with outsiders from non-peasant social strata, who are sometimes the same people who have robbed the community of land or the proceeds of produce sales.

## VI

### Ethnic identity as a social resource

There can be no doubt that ethnic differences of identity and culture strongly condition any attempt to modify the situation of indigenous peasants. The most obvious importance of the differences between indigenous and non-indigenous peasants lies in the fact that both their interpersonal relations and the views of reality and scales of values that guide the individual behaviour of these two groups follow profoundly different specific patterns. At the same time, however, it may be noted that "indigenous" status is the result of lumping together a wide variety of original peoples and relegating them all to a status below that of the "Spanish", "criollo" and "mestizo" colonial strata.

#### 1. Ethnic identity and social organization

The influence of indigenous culture and social organization is clearly important for participative development projects, and it is usually manifested in difficulties in setting projects in motion in what have been called closed corporative indigenous communities, which operate as defence mechanisms against the economic inroads of the dominant society, sometimes in veritable isolated regional strongholds.

Attention to special ethnic aspects should not be limited, however, to anthropological prescriptions which might be given for overcoming resistance to the presence of a project or to the adoption of the innovations it seeks to promote. In many cases, reluctance to go along with innovations is based on realities which the project itself will be obliged to identify and understand in order to modify its own proposed innovations; in other cases, it reflects well-founded caution about changes which may jeopardize the very survival of the community.

However, the most tightly closed indigenous communities are usually highly corporative, in the

sense of forming a true "body" in which collective action is very effective. In such cases, it is important to become familiar with the informal organizations (in the strict sense) and their religious and mutual-aid-linked bases, in order to stimulate the real leadership of the community in the right direction with suitable support from the project.

There are other elements of ethnic differences which it is even more necessary to analyse in a peasant development project: inter-ethnic relations, and ethnic and cultural identity. In all societies of the world there is some degree of ethnic-based prejudice and discrimination; even where ethnic frontiers are blurred indigenous peoples are affected by a dominant alien culture which, as well as depriving them of access to material resources (IFAD, 1993), also bombards them with messages about their alleged inferiority.

#### 2. Ethnic identity and development

In development projects, then, there are two aspects connected with ethnic issues which it is difficult but very necessary to tackle. Firstly, the project takes place within an ethnically unequal power structure which makes it harder to achieve its higher objectives, and moreover most of the officials of the project belong to the dominant ethnic group and speak only the language of that group.

Secondly, the dominant culture transmits to the indigenous culture its perception that the latter is inferior, either in a frankly racist manner, or by taking an "enlightened" attitude which assumes that Western knowledge has a monopoly of the enlightened truth, while the indigenous culture is implicitly seen as a stronghold of ignorance and superstition. The danger is that implicit attitudes which reflect the innermost views of some extension workers or other officials may give the impression that the project

claims to offer "superior" forms of knowledge and power and that indigenous groups are seen as ignorant. This attitude, which is sometimes quite unconscious, has its worst effects when it is internalized and accepted by indigenous persons themselves, who end up denying their own ethnic identity (Adams, 1990, pp. 197 - 224).<sup>8</sup>

A clear sense of identity is a basic human need as important as food itself. A positive self-image which includes a sense of belonging to a sector of mankind perceived as worthwhile is essential as a motive for self-esteem, particularly in the adolescent phase of formation of the adult personality. Fortu-

nately, all over Latin America there is a recent trend towards the formation of positive self-images based on indigenous ethnic identity. As the problem is still very real, however, a development strategy which ignores it would jeopardize the attainment of the project's objectives (Kleymeyer, 1993; Partridge and others, 1996).

For the full application of an analysis of ethnic issues, it is also necessary to develop objectives aimed at strengthening the local culture and promoting indigenous self-management, but these subjects are outside the scope of the present paper, which is of an introductory nature.<sup>9</sup>

## VII

### Some practical connotations

Some of the anthropological concepts summarized in this article may be important for specific areas of the practical activities of community-centered participative rural development projects: for example, for classifying households or farms, for analysing probable systemic impacts of project activities, for forming organized groups and, as we shall see below, especially for those project components connected with organization, extension, credit and marketing.

The concept of the life cycle is particularly useful in practical terms for the *organization* and *training* components of the projects in question. Young adults who have more schooling and are easier to train rarely have a high level of authority, prestige or power. They can be trained as technicians, and it is important to give support to their medium-term training, as possible future leaders. But they are also the kind of young people most likely to migrate, because they have fewer possibilities of managing local resources at this stage of their life cycle.

With regard to the *credit* component, men aged around 35 to 45 are those most interested in investing. It is hard for young people to do this because they are poorer, they are concerned primarily with survival, or they prefer to migrate. However, making credit available to young people may stimulate ad-

vance inheritance in order to procure more resources for the household. The mere hint of possibilities for investment through a project can cause migrants to return. As young people have new ideas on consumption and independence, they are most likely to be interested in proposals for generating new local sources of income rather than emigrating.

Furthermore, the prestige of a post associated with the project can be a powerful asset of the *participation* component, if properly analysed and exploited.

Familiarity with the informal social *organization* is essential for working with a participative approach in each specific community to reduce rural poverty, because specific relations cannot be predicted exactly on the basis of a conceptual framework or knowledge of similar communities. It is a positive factor for the project's activities when the potential for cooperation goes beyond the interest group based on farm systems and the support group, kinship relations and vertical mutual aid all lead to multi-faceted forms of cooperation which go beyond the limits of a single production model.

It must be borne in mind, however, that the dynamics of cooperation on a scale larger than that of the mutual support quasi-group involve other criteria for consolidation. Cooperation among people with no

<sup>8</sup> As Adams points out—in keeping with the definition of culture given at the beginning of the present article—cultural change does not necessarily mean the loss of indigenous identity.

<sup>9</sup> For a diagnostic study and proposal regarding the IFAD projects with indigenous peoples, see Helms, 1994.

prior mutual aid relations calls for the constant repetition of joint actions in order to test and strengthen the confidence in members of other (rival) mutual aid groups as well as to confirm (through repeated tests) the faith in the aims of the project and the capacity of its staff.

In the *organization* component, it is important to remember that the selection of young people by the community as leading officials of organizations promoted from outside is no guarantee that they really have the authority that their posts would appear to give them. The men with the highest prestige often do not hold formal posts in the community: young people may enjoy their support because of their knowledge of the non-peasant world, but they may be merely "ambassadors" or "foreign ministers" of the real, informal rulers of the community, who are often not familiar with the language of the dominant culture.

The *marketing* component is of key importance for the success of projects to combat rural poverty, because it has the potential to secure a significant improvement in the prices received for crops even in the first year of activity of the project. However, the formation and functioning of marketing committees raises a number of complications for whose solution the anthropological concepts of kinship, quasi-groups and patron-client mutual aid may be of key importance.

Thus, for example, when a group of peasants start their own marketing activities under the auspices of the project, this may break the relations of dependence and exploitation which existed with intermediaries who took advantage of mutual aid links for that purpose. The main challenge is to establish mutual confidence among the peasants involved, because they will have to entrust their products to some of the members of the marketing committee who are

responsible for delivering them to a reception centre and finalizing the sale. Clearly, kinship groups provide a basis for such confidence, but usually not all the members of a kinship group produce and market the same crops. Consequently, marketing is an ideal activity for trying to extend the cooperation typical of kinship relations to broader interest groups.

Marketing can also be fertile ground for helping to reduce to some extent the total predominance of the life strategy of the male head of household compared with that of the women. In many peasant cultures, retail commerce (selling small amounts of produce to consumers at regularly-held fairs and markets) is a traditional activity of adult women. Moreover, generally speaking their own production of small livestock, vegetables, handicraft articles, etc., belongs to them personally, as do the proceeds of its sale. Thus, the formation of marketing committees made up of women, as well as "women's banks" organized around these production activities, is already culturally sanctioned as something traditional and acceptable.

Finally, with regard to the *extension* component, the key anthropological concepts set forth in this article must be assimilated by the extension workers, but something which is even more important is that they should accustom themselves to think like researchers, cultivate a sense of curiosity to learn more, try to understand peasant life better, and not merely limit themselves to transferring technical know-how. This involves collecting data, improving and enriching their own models of production systems, and being conscious of their ambivalent role: as non-indigenous public officials, usually quite young, their prestige—in a post obtained despite their relative youth, and independently of their professional knowledge—will depend on their spirit of service and the power of the project *vis-à-vis* the State apparatus.

## VIII

### Final comments

It is hoped that these notes may be useful for participative rural development projects, because the planning of production itself, and especially the analysis of the difficulties which are inevitable in the operation of any project, demand that the analysis should not be limited to a standard "small

producer" model but should cover the special socio-cultural conditions of Latin American peasants. The main objective in drafting this paper has been to help to develop the analytical capacity of non-anthropological staff of rural development projects—especially among the extension workers,



who are the key human factor in any rural project—and to stimulate among them a concern to develop more sophisticated models of the actual conditions they seek to change.

It does not seem overly ambitious, however, to think in terms of also developing the capacity for analysis of the beneficiaries of rural projects themselves. They will need this capacity when outside support is withdrawn and the specific system of production, credit, organization and marketing that a project leaves behind it begins to falter because of

the changes which will sooner or later take place in the environment and which will oblige the peasants to review their approach in a hurry. It does not seem at all utopian to believe that the peasants of today—indigenous and non-indigenous—will be able to carry out the necessary analysis and management actions if the know-how transferred to them is not limited to purely technical matters but also includes training in management and the taking of decisions in a changing context.

(Original: Spanish)

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